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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000112

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SUBJECT: TFG01: SIERRA LEONE PRESIDENT KABBAH SAYS CONTE'S
TIME IS OVER, OFFERS REFUGE

Classified By: Ambassador T. N. Hull, Reasons 1.5 b/d

11. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with Sierra Leone President Kabbah on February 15. Kabbah was eager to discuss the situation in Guinea. Kabbah emphasized that the United States has great credibility in Guinea and agreed that Conte must cede power to a transitional civil authority in line with the constitution. Conte, he said, is isolated and distrustful of most African leadership, and therefore would be unlikely to listen to an ECOWAS delegation. Kabbah believes he still has some influence with Conte, but would be willing to intercede only if he felt confident of Conte's resignation. He is hesitant to put himself in a position that would seem to endorse Conte's continuance in office fearing that it would disrupt Sierra Leone's fragile stability. Nevertheless, recognizing the support Conte gave to Sierra Leone during the time of war, Conte could have refuge in Sierra Leone, should he decide to step down. Kabbah is looking forward to the upcoming visit of Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to discuss options, but is undecided about a possible joint visit to Guinea, proposed by her. End Summary

Kabbah Deplores the Situation

12. (C) Ambassador, accompanied by DCM, met with Sierra Leone President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah at his office during the afternoon of February 15. The Ambassador, earlier in the day, had discussed Guinea on the margins of a public event with the President, who indicated his desire to speak privately about the situation and to share his views on the way ahead. The Ambassador conveyed U.S. concern for the situation in Guinea. Kabbah agreed and noted that early in the present crisis the Guinean Ambassador in Sierra Leone had delivered an emotional appeal asking him to speak use his personal influence to tell Conte to "back off". The Guinean Ambassador urged Kabbah to speak with President Conte's wife, First Lady Henriette Conte, if Conte himself were unavailable. At that time the First Lady had told Kabbah that Conte would welcome a visit. Before Kabbah could go, however, Conte had agreed to name a Prime Minister. Kabbah decided that a visit would be inappropriate because he did not want to appear to be endorsing any one candidate. "Our fragile peace," he emphasized, "should not be obstructed" by people thinking Sierra Leone might be taking sides.

13. (C) Kabbah called Conte an old man who is not taken seriously by other African leaders and therefore had disengaged himself from most African leadership. Kabbah said Conte is not likely to accept an ECOWAS delegation and would only be willing to see personal friends, such as President Kabbah, President Jammeh of The Gambia and President Vieira of Guinea-Bissau. Kabbah had been approached by Nigerian President Obasango to represent ECOWAS, commenting that "they are pushing me to say to him to retire. I was prepared to go before Eugene Camara was appointed as Prime Minister."

14. (C) Kabbah indicated that a political solution to Guinea's crisis must still involve Conte. He feels that Conte must have a dialogue with key players and civil society leadership in Guinea. In the interest of public order, Conte must agree to a transfer of power and the appointment of an interim Prime Minister who is not chosen by him. Regrettably, Kabbah said, Conte has chosen to buy military loyalty by giving them money to "keep them happy." Kabbah recently called General Kerfalla to express his concern with the situation. Kerfalla, he said, told him he was getting everything "under control." Kerfalla did ask the Sierra Leone Ambassador to Guinea, apparently, for crowd control equipment. He was told no, Kabbah said.

Conte Must Go, Sierra Leone Would Offer Refuge

15. (C) Presently Kabbah is considering a proposal by Liberian President Helen Johnson Sirleaf that they visit Conte. She is expected to be in Sierra Leone after her Washington visit in a few days. Kabbah indicated, however, that he is dubious about visiting President Conte unless he can expect a positive outcome. In an election year in Sierra Leone, he does not want to appear to be supporting Conte and his cohorts, he said. The only message he would be willing to convey to Conte would be for Conte to step aside and accept a turnover of authority. This message should also include justice on behalf of those civilians killed during the demonstrations. Authority must be held accountable, Kabbah emphasized.

16. (C) Should Conte cede power and be uncomfortable

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remaining in Guinea, he would be welcome in Sierra Leone, Kabbah said. Kabbah has not forgotten the support Conte and Guinea provided when he and his government were in exile during the civil war. Kabbah is confident that Sierra Leoneans would respect such an outcome. "I would remind my people that he helped us during our problems."

The U.S. Has Influence

17. (C) The Ambassador shared with President Kabbah U.S. concerns for the future of Guinea and the need to respect the rights of Guineans. The strikes, he pointed out, were merely symptomatic of the larger problems of Guinea whose citizens were fed up with their deplorable situation. He noted that Ambassador McDonald had conveyed these concerns to Prime Minister Camara and General Kerfalla during separate meetings. The military state of siege must end and political dialogue must begin, the Ambassador said. Kabbah agreed that there needs to be a political, not a military solution and that the leadership must be held accountable for any abuse of power.

18. (C) Kabbah indicated that the United States is the most credible interlocutor to carry this message. The U.S. is not perceived to have a vested interest in Guinea beyond a desire for Guinea's democratic and economic growth and understands that Guinea has an important regional role for the future stability of the Mano River area. The vast majority of Africans, he commented, do not take Conte seriously, and he in turn does not like them much. Conte would be unlikely to be willing to meet with an ECOWAS delegation and certainly would not listen to them if he did, Kabbah concluded.

Comment

19. (C) President Kabbah recognizes that he may be the only

democratic African leader who has influence with Conte, but he is cautious about using it for a variety of reasons. He does not want to be the one to tell an old friend that his time is past, but appears to be willing to do so if Conte is willing to listen. Knowing how stubborn Conte is, Kabbah is concerned that Conte will not read the handwriting on the wall, especially with his back to it. Kabbah is not a risk taker, but may be more willing to intervene if President Johnson Sirleaf provides support. Kabbah knows that Conte must go. Delivering that message is the hard part, and clearly he would prefer the U.S. to do so. End Comment
HULL